SPORE

By Martin Brady

1

It was raining. Sheets of water descended from the turbulent night-time sky, carried on fast-moving clouds which had come inland over New York harbour. Shrouded by the rows of monstrous though pragmatic, rust-stained cubic storage depots along Pier 4 a small car sat quietly. Its lights off, its engine dead and no radio playing. The car's windscreen wipers were the only sign of life, rhythmically washing away the falling sheets of acidic water. A small overhead light illuminated its smoky confines, casting dim shadows on a pair of burly men sitting within. At two o'clock, Giorgio and Mario stepped out of the car. They strode to the Pier front and stood beneath the grotty overhang of depot six, keeping in from the rain. A flash of lightning struck the distant sea.

Mario lit a cigarette but quickly dropped it, grinding it beneath his shoe as he saw the lights of an approaching car. The brakes on the car were bad and it screeched to a halt. A man stepped out just ahead of the approaching thunder clap.

"Fifteen seconds," commented Giorgio, having counted the time between flash and thunder.

"Hey," said Pauli, "how's it going?" He sucked hard on his cigarette.

"Fine, and you?" asked Giorgio, staring hard.

"Fine." Pauli lied. He paused, flicking a nervous glance at Mario. "Joey Fats said you wanted to see me."

"You look nervous," commented Giorgio.

Pauli laughed nervously knowing he had had no choice but to turn up. "Of course I am, I know you guys."

Giorgio and Mario laughed a little, exchanging glances. "You think we're going to hurt <u>you</u>!" exclaimed Giorgio, shaking his head in mock disgust. "You insult me!"

"So why <u>am</u> I here then," he asked.

"Strictly business." Another spike of lightning struck the sea. "We want you to do a job for us."

"Yeah?" replied Pauli, sniffling slightly, "what kind of job?" He glanced around him.

"We want you to do a K.O.," said Giorgio, lifting his fist in a mock left hook, "A Rocky Marciano.. down for the count... the bell rings but he isn't getting up... the crowds roar.." And Giorgio's eyes crinkled coldly. "You up to it?" he teased, "we heard you were having problems."

"Problems?" said Pauli, shrugging off the innuendo, "I ain't got no problems."

"So these markers aren't yours then?" said Mario, joining the conversation for the first time. He took a handful of debt slips out of his pocket.

Pauli fingered his collar.

"Fifty thousand dollars, now I call that a problem... marker's with your name on them," began Giorgio, peering insistently. "The way I hear it, Pauli, Mikey the Diceman wants your balls on a platter. You're two days overdue on fifty big ones and so you're spreading some crack about Joey Fats neighbourhood to make up, double quick but there's more supply than demand on the streets these days." Giorgio paused, ready to deal. "The way I see it, Joey does you a favour. We do him a favour. You do us a favour."

"So what? I owe somebody some money. That's my problem. I can handle it. I owe you nothing!" replied Pauli, short-tempered.

"Hey, take it easy! We know that," said Giorgio, walking over to Pauli, placing his arm on his shoulder. "I got a job for you, a good one; something to pay off your debt to Mikey - and more." Giorgio smiled, pinching Pauli's cheek till it stung. Pauli pulled away and received a gentle tap on the cheek. "You're from the neighbourhood, we look after our own, blood's thicker, huh? You do this job well and the markers vanish. You don't... well that's tough." The sound of thunder reached them as a wall of sound and Pauli winced.

"Fourteen seconds," commented Giorgio, looking at his watch. "Storms getting closer." The sky lit up with another big flash.

"So who do you want me to hit?" asked Pauli, restrained by Giorgio's gentle, persuasive arm.

"He's a low-life fuck, a piece of scumbag shit," began Giorgio, spitting out the words, while at the same time looking at the second hand on his watch over Pauli's shoulder. "Joey Fats is going up on a drugs dealing charge. There are rumours that this pig might rat him out. He's a small time loser who'd sell his mother. Joey wants it done nice and quiet... maybe a burglary gone wrong, you get the idea. It's not our style, so we put forward your name because you were from the neighbourhood. We trust you. Joey will be keeping a close eye on this job, capisce?"

Pauli nodded and replied, "give me his name, and he'll be singing to the angels."

Giorgio smiled broadly. "Now that's what I like to hear," he said, approvingly. He slapped Pauli on the shoulder, looking at his watch again. "You need a light?" asked Giorgio, amicably, looking at Pauli's wet cigarette. Pauli nodded.

Giorgio took the lighter out of his pocket. He placed it under Pauli's cigarette and then quickly placed it against Pauli's neck. "Quit messing about," said Pauli, feeling the cold metal against his throat. The cigarette dropped from his mouth, falling in a slow motion spiral as he realised it was not a lighter but a gun.

Pauli's eyes bulged, his tongue swelled. His mouth opened to cry out 'No!' but he was too late...

Giorgio looked like a vicious snarling animal as he pulled the trigger, clenching his jaws and teeth tightly, uttering one last sentence with hatred and sheer malice. "His name is Pauli," he said as the thunder came on the thirteenth second, masking the gun blast which fired a bullet out of the gun's nozzle faster than the speed of sound. The bullet cut through Pauli's pink neck, shredding his tongue. The flare from the nozzle briefly lit up the scene as it seared skin black. The blast flashlit the falling cigarette. The bullet rose into the brain where Pauli lived and

schemed, pulverising his optical nerves, popping out his right eye, drilling through the grey trifle of thought. The forelobes of his brain were blitzed and they erupted; blasting off the top of his skull.

The thunder rolled by and Pauli fell to the ground. He hit the wet ground with a thud and his eye rolled away from his body, down the Pier.

"Dump the car and pick up the rest of him," ordered Giorgio, dragging Pauli's bloody corpse back to his beat-up Chevrolet, lifting him into the boot.

Mario opened Pauli's car door and took off the handbrake, rolling it over the side of the pier. It sank slowly to the silt floor.

Mario then scooped up the remains of Pauli's brain and found his missing eye, replacing it in the oval, bloodied crown. He walked carefully back to the car where Giorgio held open a plastic binliner for the remains. The bag was sealed and dropped on the beige back seat. Mario hopped in the front and Giorgio drove away from the scene of the crime, doing a sedate thirty-five.

"We going to cut up the body?" asked Mario.

"No, Joey doesn't want to do it the normal way. He's worried that the cops will be keeping a close eye on him so none of his places are safe this close to the trial. Joey wants Pauli to vanish without a trace. He told me what to do," replied Giorgio, keeping his eyes peeled on the road, heading up New York state.

"What are we going to do with it then?" asked Mario.

Giorgio smiled and looked at his right-hand man. "We're going to do what every good citizen does when a friend dies."

Mario sat up, intrigued. "What?" he asked.

"We're going to bury him in a graveyard with another fresh cadaver in a nice newly dug grave. The two corpses will keep each other company until the worms get them."

"We're going to bury him with another stiff!" exclaimed Mario and Giorgio nodded. "What about the watchman?" wondered Mario.

"No problem, he was given the night off," smiled Giorgio. "Joey has a slice of every pie in the city, legit or not. This graveyard is one of his more useful investments." Both mafioso laughed.

2

It was four o'clock in the morning when the green Chevrolet pulled to a halt on the gravel driveway outside the graveyard.

"Now what?" asked Mario, raising his eyebrows questioningly.

"You drive," replied Giorgio, curtly. He stepped out of the car, closing the car door firmly behind him as Mario slid over into the driver's seat.

Giorgio strolled forward. He looked through the cast iron gates of the main entrance. He saw the watchman's small wooden house. A light glimmered behind the curtained window. Giorgio took a duplicate key for the gate out of his pocket and slid it into the lock; not doubting for a minute that it would work and it did. He pushed the gate open...

As Giorgio entered the desolate graveyard, the rain stopped. He waved Mario on. The car inched slowly forward, stopping outside the caretaker's house. Giorgio double-checked that it was empty before climbing back into the car. He took a slip of neatly folded paper out of his jacket pocket, unfolded it and read the name out, "The winner of tonight's lucky prize.. Keith Jozef.. the Cedars.. plot 5.."

The car crawled forward along the narrow asphalt road, cutting through the graveyard. "There," pointed Giorgio, noticing the kerbside sign as it was caught in the car's head-lights. The gold embossed words read: <u>The Cedars</u>. The car slowed to a stop.

Mario stepped out of the automobile on the wind-buffered side and leaned his stolid arms on its rusty roof. "We take out the body?" he asked but Giorgio shook his head and replied, "No." He opened the back car door, taking out two shovels and a roll of plastic, placing the items on the damp ground. "First we dig."

Mario and Giorgio changed into their workmen's overalls, zipping them up to their necks firmly. The two burly men walked down the narrow pathway, looking for lot 6. The pavestones came to an abrupt end.

"Where the fuck is it?" asked Mario, fingering the silver cross and chain about his neck. His partner reacted with a steady "quiet". Giorgio's penlite torch revealed the six freshly dug graves ahead of them. Each had a marker identifying those resting there, to be used at a later date by the head-stone placer.

Giorgio fully extended his arm and uncovered his watch. He shone his torch on it, eyes focusing; eighteen after four.

"Ok, we've two hours," he said, unrolling the plastic swathe. "Keep the dirt on the plastic. Let's keep it neat. Ok?" Mario nodded in affirmation, taking the first spadeful of dirt and placing it on the wide plastic sheet, digging towards death.

Mario dug fast, knowing time was of the essence, sweating in his confining outfit. The mound of clay on the sheet grew steadily larger as he dug deeper, until he reached the casket...

Clunk, Mario raised his spade tried to dig again, Clunk!

The tip of his shovel snapped off as metal struck metal. "Jesus!" exclaimed Mario. "The coffin's made of fucking metal!"

Giorgio looked into the grave with disbelief. "It can't be," he said, "clear the mud off the top of the coffin. Double-check it." The metal cask shone dully in the torch light, reflecting the scattered light.

"It's metal all right," said Mario, rapping it with his knuckles. Mario then cleared the mud from the side of the cask, shouting with disbelief, "it's got a fucking padlock on it too!" Mario looked up at Giorgio with a look that said it all.

"Fuck it!" shouted Giorgio, kicking the other shovel across the neat mound of dirt. He stood on his spot, scratching his irritable scalp.

"We dig up another one?" asked Mario.

"No," replied Giorgio, shaking his hand negatively, looking at his watch. "We haven't got the time..." Then what? What? Think dammit! He sighed audibly. "We're going to have to open it."

Mario wiped his mouth. "How are we going to open this?"

Giorgio unzipped his jacket and pulled out his magnum revolver. "Like this," he said, calmly. He warned his friend to stand back. Mario

scrambled out of the grave. Four bullets were aimed at the lock, shattering it.

"Open it," said Giorgio, calmly, holstering his gun.

Mario stalled. He fingered the silver cross about his neck superstitiously.

Giorgio's expression hardened and his brow creased again, "I said open it!"

"Why would anyone bury someone in a metal cask and lock it?" asked Mario.

"Who gives a good goddamn fuck! I told you to open it, or do you want to join Pauli and make it a threesome?" said Giorgio. Spittle flew from his rancid mouth as he reached for his gun.

"I'm doing it, Ok!!" replied Mario. He jumped down onto the coffin with a thud. His workman's boots left an imprint on the metal coffin.

First, he unscrewed the six awkward metal bolts on the cask lid, knocking them loose with his spade. He then kneeled on the cask. His fingers probed for the place where the lid joined the cask. He found a strip of masking tape which was the outermost part of an airtight seal. Unzipping his overalls, he took a penknife from his pocket. The sharp blade clicked out of its slot. He punctured the masking tape and smoothly scored the join, neatly slicing the tape open.

Mario tried to open the coffin but it still wouldn't budge. He spotted the glue-like resin, holding the top and bottom of the metal cask together.

Mario sighed. "I'll need the crowbar from the trunk. It's been glued together." Giorgio nodded and ran to the car, opening the boot. He took the crowbar, glancing furtively at his watch, estimating how they were keeping to schedule. He wondered what dark secret lay in the coffin.

Giorgio appeared at the rim of the muddy grave and passed the crowbar down to Mario who began to pry open the recalcitrant cask. He stayed to one side of the cask, keeping his body-weight off the coffin. The seals loosened with a loud crack!..

Air hissed into the vacuum sealed coffin, allowing some of the dusty contents to puff out into the still night air. "I got it!" exclaimed Mario in a strained voice, panting. Beads of sweat rolled down his cheeks and dripped off his dimpled chin. He pried his way along the length of the coffin. The seals grew looser until at last the top was free.

"Don't open it yet," said Giorgio. "We'll bring Pauli over, open the cask and then drop him in."

Giorgio offered Mario a hand out of the muddy, rain splattered, grave. They trotted over to the car. "Grab his arms," said Giorgio, dragging Pauli out of the boot. Mario held Pauli in place while Giorgio picked up the plastic bag with the other bodily remains.

Giorgio took Pauli by the legs. They carried his dead-weight to the grave, their feet squelching heavily in the mud.

When they reached the edge of the grave, they laid Pauli's body down. "How'd you want to do this?" asked Mario, wrapping a handkerchief about his face. Giorgio did likewise...

"Open the coffin and we'll drop him in," said Giorgio. Mario climbed reluctantly into the grave again. He slid his wet fingers into the joint. The cask lid was heavy and Mario had to struggle to open it. Eventually, he did so. The features of the corpse were hidden by the enfolding darkness.

Mario climbed quickly out of the grave and Giorgio rolled Pauli's body into the grave. It landed with a thud. A cloud of dust suddenly rose out of the grave and Giorgio pulled away. Mario was coughing when Giorgio shone a finger of torch light into the grave.

"You Ok?" asked Giorgio, looking at Mario.

"Yeah, just the fucking dust. I didn't expect it," replied Giorgio.

A cloud of grey swirling dust enveloped the grave through which the shadowy outline of the two bodies could be seen.

"Where's the other corpse?" wondered Giorgio, shining his torchlight into the cask.

"Looks like it collapsed," coughed Mario, peering into the grave.

Giorgio began to see the outline of the crusty corpse of Keith Jozef beneath Pauli. The body had disintegrated into a dusty powder in parts.

Keith's body was a desiccated husk. Its teeth were blackened, its eyes empty sockets, its fingers clawed, contorted. The corpse's torso was crouched like a foetus.

"He must've been burnt to death," commented Giorgio. He cast the top of Pauli's head into the coffin before knocking it shut with his spade. The coffin closed with a menacing thud. "Come on," said Giorgio, as the first spadeful of clay clattered on the metal coffin, interring the bodies once again. "Let's fill it in and get the fuck out of here."

"I hear you," said Mario, burying the evidence. They left the grave as they found it and stripped off their overalls.

They drove away as the glimmer of dawn appeared over the horizon.

3

Giorgio had been driving eastward for an hour when he swung off the highway, turning into a forested area. The car pulled to a stop.

Giorgio looked at Mario and said, "out." Mario did as he was told. He stretched lightly, a dry thirst having come over him.

Giorgio opened the boot of the Chevrolet. He took out a can of gasoline and doused the car with the pungent liquid. Moving away from the automobile, he threw a match in.

"Come on, let's go," said Giorgio. The two men strolled through the wood, working their way between the trees to another road two hundred metres away. Behind them, the car burned itself out.

Both men came out into a clearing. The flames shimmered distantly behind them, illuminating the outline of a cleverly hidden silver Corvette. They sat into the car and Giorgio started up the engine. Giorgio placed the automatic in gear, moving off, out of the forest, down a declivity. Turning left again, they picked up speed on the highway.

Time to make the call, thought Giorgio, making sure not to use the traceable car phone. He pulled into a gasoline station and made the call to Sidewalks, Joey's bar. The phone burred twice before being answered.

"Yeah?" came a slow, drawling, voice.

"Tell Joey that the delivery van can't come until Thursday," said Giorgio, emphasising the day.

"Thursday," repeated the voice and Giorgio replied with a, casual, "Yeah." Both men hung up. Giorgio got back into the car and drove off.

Giorgio dropped Mario off at his Queens apartment and sped home. Giorgio collapsed in bed, sleeping as the sun gathered strength over the city, dreaming about being a made man...

4

The phone rang. A dusky orange sky painted Giorgio's bedroom sundry sanguine shades. The phone rang again and Giorgio sat up, blearily rubbing the sleep from his eyes. Irritated, he scratched his itchy right hand before answering the phone with a testy, "yeah?"

There was a pause before the caller answered in a dry, crackly voice. "Giorgio, it's me," said Mario.

"What's up?" asked Giorgio, recognising the distant voice, wondering if perhaps the police had called.

There was the sound of a harsh, rattling cough which made Giorgio shudder.

Mario spoke up. "No time to talk. I'm in trouble, get over here." The sentence was followed by a disconnect tone.

"What kind of trouble?" asked Giorgio. He slammed down the phone, both out of anger and worry. Giorgio climbed out of bed quickly and dressed.

He dashed into his Corvette and the tyres spun hard, burning rubber. The car spun wildly out of the garage and righted itself, speeding past the nine blocks to Mario's apartment.

The car skidded to a stop outside the apartment block. Giorgio hopped out of the automobile gingerly, taking brisk semi-controlled steps past the nodding doorman. He walked through the revolving doors and across the imitation marble floor, entering the elevator, heading towards the sixth-floor.

The elevator door pinged open and Giorgio stepped tentatively onto the deep-pile carpet. He looked about him hard, alert to a possible trap but the corridor was quiet. He strolled forward, hand in pocket, gripping his snub-nosed magnum, ready for anything. He moved slowly to Mario's apartment, no. 617. The door was unlocked. It squeaked open gently when he pressed against it.

"Come on in, Giorgio," said Mario. His voice was cracking and rough.

The mafioso entered the room slowly. The lights were off, the curtains drawn. He took the gun out of his pocket. His instinct was to suspect a trap and he reached with his free hand to turn on the living room light but Mario interrupted. "Don't turn on the lights, it hurts my eyes," he said, "turn on that side lamp beside your feet. Aim the light at the floor." Giorgio did so, leaning down, casting a dim, hazy light across the room which illuminated only the shadowy outline of Mario.

"What the fuck is going on?" asked Giorgio.

Mario began to cough. His lungs rattled like a worn engine. Giorgio saw his partner in crime spit out a line of stringy phlegm into his handkerchief. Mario's breathing was coming in short gasps. Giorgio watched his friend's silhouetted outline gulp down a glass of water as if it were his last.

"It's eating me, Giorgio. It's eating my flesh," said Mario, letting out a light moan of pain. He felt his skin tighten.

"<u>What's</u> eating you?" asked Giorgio, growing curious. He tried to look past the dim light.

"Keep away," coughed the dark figure, lifting his clawed, contorted hands. Giorgio took out his penlite torch and shone it on the left side of his partner's face. It looked fine.

Giorgio moved the thin beam of light across Mario's face. He began to feel nauseous as he saw the fine, orange tendrils, creeping across Mario's face and neck. The tendrils emanated from the charred, blackened flesh, that had once been his partners face. Whatever it was, it had taken over half of Mario's face and it was growing, consuming his flesh. It was fast, growing even as Giorgio watched.

In the heart of the blackened flesh, small, white, mushroom-like fungi were growing. Mario had scratched many of the growths away, leaving dark globules of congealed blood scattered over the grated, raw skin. Giorgio could smell the rotting flesh. He traced the growth down the side of Mario's neck.

"It's working its way down my chest," rasped Mario. His left eye oozed a yellow pus as he tried to blink. "I can hardly see any more, I can't move my hands," crackled Mario, breaking down. "I took a shower, to wash the dust off me and that's when it started. I fed it, it uses water. I'm thirsty all the time." Mario coughed a mouthful of yellow and black sputum onto the floor, joining the other globs. "There was something in that grave," he wheezed.

The sight and smell was all to much for Giorgio. He stood up, ran over to the sink and vomited. He heard his partner's plea: "You gotta help me, Giorgio." Mario reached out his clawed blackened hand, imploring. "You gotta.."

Giorgio stood up, wiping his fetid mouth off his jacket sleeve. He wrapped a towel about his hand and said, "Come on, we're going to the hospital." Giorgio offered his towelled arm as support and Mario stood up, shakily at first. He panted with each step.

Giorgio took Mario downstairs to the car. They ignored the horrified looks of the bellboy and the doorman. Mario shouted at them, "What the hell are you looking at?" Still, they stared at the leprous looking man whose face and hands seemed to be consumed by growing tongues of black death.

The car pulled into the emergency entrance, blocking an ambulance. Giorgio jumped out of the car, running around to the driver's side, opening the door. Mario staggered out, onto the road. Three attendants ran out to help him. They stopped in their tracks, ran back to the hospital and re-emerged, wearing plastic gloves and face masks. They lifted Mario onto a trolley, dragging him into the innards of the hospital.

It was an hour before a tall, thin, doctor made his way out to Giorgio. His face was grave and severe. The doctor was still wearing a green surgical mask which was lowered about his neck and a pair of rubber gloves. "You are Giorgio, I take it?" asked the English sounding doctor, curtly. Giorgio replied with a nod. "Your friend has been talking about you for quite a while." The doctor paused. Giorgio noted the physician's hesitation as if he were holding something back.

"What's happening to him?" asked Giorgio.

"He has some form of fungal infection growing on his skin. I've never seen anything like it before. However, I am not an expert in this area, so we have sent for a specialist. In the meanwhile I'm looking after Mario. First, I need you to help me Giorgio. I need to have detailed information on Mario's movements over the last forty-eight hours." The doctor waited, hopeful for an informative reply.

Giorgio held back, knowing that he could not admit to the truth, "I don't know where he's been," he said, shrugging his shoulders. "I called into Mario's apartment this evening to go out for a drink, found him the way you see him and brought him to you. That's <u>all</u> I know."

The doctor sighed and looked away, preoccupied, knowing that was not what he had wanted to hear. "Could you follow me, please," said the doctor.

"Where are we going?" asked Giorgio, cautiously.

"Just up the corridor," said the doctor, blandly.

"<u>Where</u> up the corridor?" asked Giorgio. He reached for the gun in his pocket, worrying maybe that Mario had let loose the truth.

"To a private room. We need to keep you in for observation. It's for your own good," he said, unconvincingly.

"No," replied Giorgio, his mood swinging sharply. "Take me to see Mario."

"I'm afraid I can't do that," replied the doctor.

Giorgio took the gun out of his pocket and placed it against the doctor's back, out of view. "You can do whatever you want, you're the doctor," said Giorgio, shocking the physician.

"All right, I'll take you to him," said the doctor, trying to be calm. He led Giorgio up the corridor to the intensive ward.

Giorgio found Mario lying in a plastic oxygen tent in a private room. His body was all but covered by the fungal growth. The small white mushrooms on his skin had grown further, looking like toadstools. They had matured, turning a reddish black as they fed on his blood supply. Giorgio moved closer to the oxygen tent, his eyes bulging with disbelief and he called out to his friend, "Mario?"

Mario lurched to his right. His clawed left hand scraped against the plastic seal of the oxygen tent, some of the destroyed flesh forming a black scum on the seal.

"Don't touch the tent, the growth can dissolve plastic," warned the doctor, his voice quavering.

"Gior-g-o?" rasped Mario. His eyes were pussed and grown over. By now, the inside of his mouth was mossy covered and green. "Kill me... please," he asked. Instead, Giorgio backed away from Mario, more afraid than ever. He placed his gun against the doctor's neck.

"Do something for him!" urged Giorgio. "Can't you see he's in pain!?"

"There's nothing I can do for him," replied the doctor, looking at the prostrate man, "he's gone too far."

Mario's body began to shake and shudder. His heartbeat fluttered erratically, as the infection choked the life out of him.

"I would estimate that it is highly contagious," said the doctor, backing away from Giorgio, attempting to duck out of the room. The doctor looked at Giorgio's right hand which the mafioso had absent-mindedly been scratching. Now, Giorgio followed the physician's glances, seeing the

scratch marks on his hand which were beginning to darken and sting slightly.

Giorgio stared with disbelief, remembering how he had used the hand to help Mario out of the muddy grave. He ran over to the sink in the hospital room and began scrubbing his hands with soap and water. He tried vainly to remove the discolouration. Instead the skin flaked away, drawing blood. "I would think, the only sure solution is amputation before it gets into your blood," advised the doctor but Giorgio pointed his gun at the doctor, threateningly.

"Nobody is cutting me up!" shouted Giorgio. He stormed out of the room, a dry thirst having come over him. His lips were beginning to grow parched and drained. Giorgio drove off, heading back to the cemetery, wanting to talk to the graveyard caretaker, needing some answers about Keith Jozef quickly...

6

Giorgio sped out of New York city and lit a cigarette. His body was dehydrated but he refused to drink anything. He remembered what Giorgio had said about the growth needing water. Still, the fungal infection was expanding, using the fluid in Giorgio's body, sapping his strength. He swallowed hard, feeling his dry throat and loosened his collar. A light, clammy sweat gathered on his forehead.

Giorgio let out a slight moan of pain as he felt the skin on his right hand tighten painfully. He wanted to scratch the skin on his hand but he held sway against this urge, knowing that he would only be spreading the infection further.

He uncovered his cloth wrapped hand. A network of orange tendrils was working its way up the fingers and thumb of his right hand. The skin was beginning to look crumpled and dry. The skin's pigment was darkening ominously. The finger muscles were contracting involuntarily, forming a gnarled hand.

Giorgio was finding it increasingly difficult to breathe as he drove and he threw open his shirt collar, scratching his chest. He noticed the black, dead, skin under his fingernails. Giorgio pulled off the

interstate highway, stopping in a lay-by. Quickly he unbuttoned his shirt. It was on his chest too. He started a fit of coughing which drew a black scum from his throat... in my lungs too, he thought, gasping, haven't much time, he realised.

He pulled out of the lay-by, picking up speed. The skin was tightening on his right elbow. The growth was halfway up his arm now, a searing pain spreading across his body. Giorgio remembered the way Mario had died. He knew he would not let himself go that far.

Outside the car, Giorgio's worst fears were realised. The storm was back. The sky opened up, releasing a torrent of rain which splattered off the fast moving Corvette. In the distance, a spike of lightning lit up the darkening sky and the night-time wind boomed resonantly.

As he drove along the highway, he felt his eyes growing dry and waterless. His eyelids were beginning to grate against his sclera. Ahead, he saw the right turn which he had previously made to the graveyard with Mario.

He pulled off the highway, half a mile down the road. The thunder sent waves of sound crashing from the clouds as he stepped out into the night. He wrapped his overcoat about him and brought the collar up about his neck. He closed the door behind him and ran into the forest. Dribbles of water gathered in Giorgio's hair. They began to run down his face and behind his ears, dripping down his neck.

Giorgio was breathing heavily as he climbed the slippery pine-needled incline, using his good hand to help pull himself up the slope. The drops of water fed the life-form. It experienced a new burst of growth as Giorgio's skin perspired. The orange tendrils worked their way up his neck to the side of his face.

By the time Giorgio had made it to the top of the slope, the skin about his neck and side of his face was blackening. The tendrils were working their way out of his mouth, across his tongue and down his lower lip. Giorgio leaned against the tall graveyard wall, catching his breath, knowing he was dying at an accelerated rate. He coughed harshly, spitting

the evergrowing bits of brown sputum onto the ground. His heartbeat was erratic at times, sending him into a dizzy spin. He looked up at the ten-feet high stone wall and saw the dim pallor of light emanating from a distant source on the other side. He had to see what was on the other-side of the wall.

He searched about the trees and found a piece of wood which he placed against the wall, dragging it there with his good hand. He put one foot on the slippery lump of wood and tried to jump up. He slipped off it, falling onto his destroyed hand. Giorgio let out a gurgled gasp of retching pain.. but he stood up, again.. determined.

This time, Giorgio made sure that his footing was secure on the log and lurched upwards. He used the log to gain additional height and his good, left hand, reached the top of the wall. He hung onto it like life itself. He swung his other foot against the wall, the shoe finding a cleft. The final part of the manoeuvre required that Giorgio swing his charred hand, now overgrown with mushroom-like fungi, onto the top of the wall. He did so agonizingly and felt the dead skin tear about the arm. He dragged himself over the top.

Giorgio fell awkwardly into the graveyard with a thud. He was wheezing now, trying to suck the air into his moss-covered lungs. There wasn't much time. He looked across the graveyard fleetingly, assessing the situation before thinking about what to do next. He placed his left hand about his gun and he heard two men arguing.

7

"Don't move," wheezed Giorgio and John turned around. The company director gasped with horror when he saw Giorgio. The bones of Giorgio's right hand were showing through. His eye was covered and oozing vilely. However, Giorgio was still alive and dangerous, aiming precariously, swaying on his spot.

"Put the gun down, son," urged John, reaching out to Giorgio. "We can help you."

"Don't call me son, shithead," rasped Giorgio and he shot John in the face, piercing his environment suit facemask, splattering crimson

blood and brain all over the inside of the helmet. The sound of the gunshot resounded about the graveyard as John collapsed to the ground. The military men in the distance acted on the new threat.

"You created this?" asked Giorgio, showing Professor Marcus Jones his withered hand.

"No, Keith did," replied Marcus, glancing furtively at John, knowing he was next.

"The corpse?" asked Giorgio, finding himself losing his breath. Giorgio's head spun gently, sometimes swaying. Giorgio thought it was ironic that he was being killed by a corpse. He sat back on a gravestone, balancing precariously. The sky flashed with lightning and he looked up, counting the seconds.

Marcus said nothing but looked at what had once been a prosperous man, wondering who he was. The thunder came. "Seven seconds," muttered Giorgio. He fixed his stare and aim on Marcus.

The sky lit up with a flash of lightning again. Giorgio pulled the firing pin backwards on his gun, ready to fire but his hand was shuddering as the spore progressed down his left arm.

"You know, I could have been someone..." rasped Giorgio, trying to aim his gun. "I could've been a made man," he said.

The thunder came again and Giorgio placed the gun against his own temple. "Six seconds," muttered Giorgio. He pulled the trigger.

The End.